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AUTHOR Winograd, David; Milton, Katherine
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which the perception of a real-time classroom exchange serves as the conduit to a grander socially constructed conflict through the mediation of an asynchronous online listserve. The sample of 25 listserve messages was selected from a class of 191 undergraduate students in the lecture section of an introductory computer technology class. During the course of the class, a visiting colleague frequently interjected comments and information from the back of the lecture hall, interrupting the flow of the lecturer's presentation. The students did not comment on this during the lecture, but used the listserve to voice their ideas and concerns about the interruption. Selected e-mail messages from the students are reproduced and analyzed in this paper. Findings indicate that in the absence of mediation by the central characters being discussed, the discourse elements of declaration, hedging, and flaming, in the construction of this online conflict, emerged as the primary engines that propelled the conflict forward, and finally to its resolution. The attributes of restatement, set-up, transition, and attack emerged as the salient features used by students as they constructed a conflict reality that was quite different in the virtual space of communication than it was in the physical classroom. Includes a list of forms of hedging. (AEF)

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Construction of Conflict: A Microethnographic Study

David Winograd and Katherine Milton

d.winograd@asu.edu Katherine@asu.edu

Arizona State University

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This paper explores the ways in which the perception of a real-time classroom exchange serves as the conduit to a grander socially constructed conflict through the mediation of an asynchronous online listserve.

During the course of an introductory computer technology class, a visiting colleague frequently interjects comments and information from the back of the lecture hall, interrupting the flow of the lecturer's presentation. This event is noted by the students but not commented upon during the course of the lecture.

As a part of the course, the students are required to participate in some periodic graded assignments that are delivered through an online listserve. The students also use the listserve as an informal discussion forum to voice ideas and concerns relating to the course. As a result of the interjection event, students worked to create a discourse of conflict involving the lecturer and the commenting colleague. Both the lecturer and colleague intentionally kept silent during the unfolding of this online discussion. Issues involving control of class, pace of course information, politeness protocols, and conspiracy evolve from the postings by concerned students.

The raw data, in the form of email messages were collected and analyzed for content, focus, and themes. Using the NUD*IST qualitative research software developed by QSR, we discover not only the construction of a discreet event, but ancillary concerns of the students. In the minds of the students, as discovered in the data, there was a substantial discord between lecturer and colleague, that was absent from the real-time event, as experienced by the instructors. Discourse analysis will serve as the lens to illuminate the structure and flow of the created conflict.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical grounding for this research is founded in the principles of symbolic interactionism. Using this theory, social action can be viewed as a sequential process, with meaning constructed step by step, as participants align and realign their actions together. To understand an event, it is necessary to understand the participant's definition of the situation, the meaning it holds, and the nature of the participant's expectations. These expectations are brought from one event to another. The principles of symbolic interactionism allow us to articulate the ways in which an event happens as a result of an array of participant actions, reactions, and interpretations.

Discourse analysis was developed in order to make legitimate analysis of types of language that do not fit into the established subfields of linguistics. More narrowly focused, it has come to be regarded by many as synonymous with the name of the discipline, and to work in other disciplines that also study language. (Tannen, 1989) With very little research being done into the discourse of online communication it would seem that discourse analysis is appropriate to explore the meanings behind the messages in an online forum.

Using the tools of microethnography we identified a discrete event that emerged from the student discourse postings on an asynchronous listserve system. Original unedited source documentation provides a content and context-specific view into the construction of a conflict. Patterns of participation were initially housed under broad thematic categories, which in turn revealed subcategories.

Sample:

The sample was self-selected from a class of 191 undergraduates in the lecture section of an introductory computer technology class containing 120 females and 71 males. The breakdown by class showed 23 Freshmen, 76 Sophomores, 54 Juniors and 38 Seniors. The class is one of five classes in which a student may enroll in fulfillment of a graduation requirement. Roughly half the students were education majors.

Research Methodology:

Working independently we read and coded 25 listserve messages, using the QSR Qualitative Software, NUD*IST to sort, track, and merge coded data. After several readings of the data we decided upon a number of broad thematic codes describing salient aspects of the constructed conflict.

The Qualitative package allowed us to visually verify coding agreements, and discrepancies. Coding discrepancies, though few, were discussed for final consideration of either inclusion or dismissal. Discrepancies varied from liberal interpretations of the data, which sometimes led to re-coding for agreement, to variations in text field identification, or taking more or less contextual spread of data. Data was then output as hard copy, and additional readings revealed subsequent qualifiers. As subsequent qualifiers were identified, it was helpful to draw these instances into graphical table form, using the spreadsheet program, Excel. Upon viewing the discourse elements within the tables, we found specific consistencies, which illustrated both voice, and shift of voice, as well as formed grammatical patterns and utilized rhetorical devices constant with the online posting style known as 'flaming'. Flaming is considered to be writing in

an uninhibited and confrontational manner. (Baym, 1995; Reid, 1991; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). In six of the twenty-five messages of the data, we found excellent examples of 'stealth flames', a particular sort of flame where the tone starts out friendly and conciliatory, evidencing support for a participant resulting in the creation of a comfort level which soon changes into angry confrontation.(Salzman & Pondiscio, 1995)

Findings:

Twenty-five listserve messages comprising the corpus of data were written over a period of eight days, with nine being written by males and sixteen written by females which is consistent with the gender distribution of the class.

The online discourse had a decidedly non-academic flavor with participants addressing each other and the instructors directly and in many cases informally. Suggestions and criticism were pointed and sometimes scathing, with ten messages suggesting action and six messages containing flames. Although these messages only constituted twenty-five percent of the corpus of data, the entire discussion hinged and turned on these messages. They were instrumental in the positioning of the participants and through the reading and subsequent response of others, incited and expanded conflict.

Three of participation emerged from the data: hedging, flaming and declaratives.

The Starting Point:

The first message wrote of a potential problem and asked for acknowledgement:

> *I was just wondering if anybody else notices that Mr. Smith likes to really get involved in Mr. Joness lectures. I think Mr. Jones is getting annoyed by this, especially on 2/19. I was just curious if anyone else had noticed this and thinks the same as I do.*

The voicing of annoyance and request for acknowledgment struck a responsive chord with the participants, resulting in the active involvement of more than twenty students on this topic. The initial message above demonstrates elements that will be further explored as we consider the various representations of voice, the strategic use of hedging, and its effect on the changeover of voice in the texts. In this starting message, the speculative assertion of "I think Mr. Jones is getting annoyed..." is posited by a voice that we'll identify as that of the "innocent bystander." Significantly present in each message, are a variety of voices that could be identified as those of:

- The Whiner: the student who writes of feeling put-upon or victimized by the classroom situation
- The Provocateur/Warrior: represented by language that might surprise, or instigate action
- The Mom or Peacemaker: demonstrated by language imploring cooperation, support, empathy, and peace, and providing ameliorating hypothesis for consideration
- The Authority: is revealed by language that sites strategies and suggestions to settle controversy.

Examples of these voices as seen in the discussion text include:

The Mom:

> *I agree that Jones should have the center stage while he is teaching his lecture, however, we do not know if he also interjects when Mr. Smith is lecturing. Maybe they have a system that allows them to interjeci informative comments during lecture and help each other out so that they do not leave anything important that the students need to know. Just a thought.*

The Whiner:

> *I find it annoying that Mr. Smith interjects his comments during lecture. It is as if Jones was a student teacher and Smith feels theneed to constantly check every single comment he makes.*
>
> *Additionally, I think the lectures go too slow. Why must we spend an entire day talking about input devices? Sure there are different types of "mice", everyone knows this stuff.*

The Authority:

> *There is two ways to deal with this problem:*
> *1.) Let him interrupt you only a couple times during class, no more. If it was anymore than he would be lecturing also.*
>
> *2.) At the end of the class, let him address any problems he had with the way you presented your material. If people want to stay and listen they can, or if people are like myself, we only need one teacher.*

The Provocateur/Warrior:

> *"FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!*
> *Behind the Auditorium Thursday after class. Be there!"*

The issue of voice in these online postings takes an intriguing shift in the rhetorical device of "flaming," which is herein examined in detail.

Flames:

In analyzing the flame oriented messages a consistent pattern emerged that would be consistent with 'stealth flames'. These flames began in a friendly manner and later became an attack. Each of the six flame oriented message contained these components:

- Restatement or metacommunication of a previous point
- Set-up
- Transition
- Attack

Also significant in the flame messages is the crossover shift of voice. A Jekyll and Hyde dynamic surfaces within these flames where messages which begin with the voice of "Mom" in the set-up, are soused by the transitional trigger, resulting in a change over to "Provocateur" or "Warrior" in the attack portion.

To demonstrate these aspects the colors shown above will be used:

The second message of the discussion contained the first instance of a flame:

> *I totally agree with what SJ and BK have to say about Mr. Smith in that he disrupts the chemistry and flow of your interesting class. Whenever he opens his mouth everyone turns around to look at him in the back of the classroom, people lose their concentration and begin to wonder, who teaches our class?*
>
> *I enjoyed the way you ripped into him in class on Thursday, maybe that will him that it is your lecture class and not his. He may have valid points and intelligent suggestions* ***but*** *it is ridiculous to hear him chime in every five minutes.*
>
> *There is two ways to deal with this problem:*
> *1.) Let him interrupt you only a couple times during class, no more. If it was anymore than he would be lecturing also.*
>
> *2.) At the end of the class, let him address any problems he had with the way you presented your material. If people want to stay and listen they can, or if people are like myself, we only need one teacher.*

In this message the restatement serves to build a sense of belonging and community, but interestingly enough it's directed at the lecturer and at not at either SJ, BK or the class in general. The set up always directly preceded the transition, and was followed by the attack. To use a sports metaphor, there was always a wind-up before the pitch. The transition took the form of but in five of the six messages.

> *I agree that Mr. Smith, although may have valid points, gets really annoying disturbing the class. If he wants to make a point, he should inform Mr. Jones of it in private, and allow him to open the next class with his point. I know Mr. Smith has all good intentions, but he makes Mr. Jones look dumb... we all know he's not, but Mr. Smith should learn a little something about respect of his collegues.*

Metacommunication is a term often used in communication theory. It restates a previous assertion which lets the initial speaker (or in this case, writer) know that their message was clearly understood. Here it serves to state a concern, in which a suggestion is made in the second sentence. The pattern of set-up, transition, attack is found twice in this message, one coming on the heels of the other. This double pattern seems to suggest how natural it is for the writer to fall into the pattern which seems very much like spoken rather than written speech.

> *I think that Mr Smith should keep quit in the back, infact why is he even there. I really think that he should not disturb the class also. I feel that his disturbances take away from the class and he is not always right, ie: the power point presentations. Well that is just my thoughts, I personally enjoy the lectures from D. Jones, but it becomes annoying to hear someone always adding to Joness lecture. Who is teaching here? Jones or Smith.*

This flame oriented message appeared after the following two messages:

> *Mr. Jones,*
> *It seems like Mr. Smith and his additional comments during class have been a hot topic on the listserv lately. What are your thoughts? Would you rather have Smith keep his mouth shut, or do you like his additional comments to what you say? And don't forget, lying to the entire class about this subject won't get you anywhere*
> *DV*

> *I agree with DV! I'd also like to know your take on the situation...???*
> *AM*

Jones made a conscious decision not to answer these queries, or in fact post anything to the discussion at all, to see how things would play out. It would appear that the students' reaction to the lack of response served as a catalyst that fanned the "flames" of conflict. It seems a bit unnerving to have Smith spoken of in this manner, especially in light of the fact that the class was informed that both Smith and Jones were reading the messages. The ending of the message:

> *Who is teaching here? Jones or Smith.*

positions Smith and Jones in opposing and perhaps combative stances. It's also the start of a mean spiritedness that hasn't been seen before in the discussion.

> *YES!!!! Maybe Jones shold say something. I know his knowledge is appreciated (Smith) but enough is enough. Often what he says, has no real relavance to what we are even learning about.*

The metacommunication/restatement in this flame message calls for action. With no intervention from the instructor, the student takes things into his own hands. The four exclamations points after the first word indicates the increasing intensity of the message. The set-up here is shorter and the attack longer than in previous messages. The discourse is continuing to become more inflammatory.

Ive read many E-mails on this subject so I decided to put my two cents in. I think that Mr. Smiths comments are disruptful to the class and disrespectful to Mr. Jones. I don't know how Mr. Jones feels about it but I feel that one teacher is enough for this class.

I don't Mind Mr.Smith making some suggesting to the class sometimes but it got a little out of hand there and I'm glad Mr. Jones showed him his place.

The call for one teacher was voiced earlier in the discussion making this the restatement/metacommunicative phrase of the message. Included is a reference to Jones' lack of participation and perhaps a bit of deference to the teacher. The attack refers to 'showing him his place', a metaphor of violence. From Smith and Jones' perspective the 'showing him his place' didn't exist. This is a very interesting turn of events and one that might only be clarified by an uninvolved observer. At this point the conflict is built and perhaps the impeding fight has already taken place in the construction of the writer.

I have to agree with the majority of emails that I have read regarding Smith's interjects during our class. I don't want to see this course turn into a battle for control between the two instructors.
Why does Smith even need to be in our classroom? Shouldn't he have better things to do?
I received some very knowledgeable information from Smith before the semester began, so I know that he is well adversed in his subject; however, he is undermining Jones's lectures, which I don't appreciate. I want to feel confident in my instructors, and I'm starting to lose that confidence in this
class, and that bothers me. I want the simplicity of ONE instructor, and

ONE lecture. Hopefully, Smith is reading these emails, too!

The creation of conflict is complete. The restatement posits two opposing antagonists engaged in battle for the control of the class. The attack section of the messages notes that an unwelcome invader is undermining the class. This invader should be banished.

Although potentially in jest, the next message states:

FIGHT ! FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!

Behind the Auditorium Thursday after class. Be there!

This seems to sum things up quite neatly and from this point the conflict blows over and other issues are discussed on the listserve. Although the flame oriented messages only total six out of the twenty-five messages that comprise the event, these flame-oriented messages make up the engine that suggests, creates and disposes of the negotiated conflict.

Hedging:

From the onset of the discussion, through to the end, we saw episodic use of language that illustrated uncertainty, equivocation, and insecurity of position. These "hedges" took on a strategic dynamic, appearing regularly in flaming messages, and significantly absent from the declarative messages of praise and support. Within the grouping of "hedges", the following subcategories emerged as overarching themes within the hedge:

- Things we don't know
  This subcategory emerged as expressions that state unknown variables in the conflict.
- Equivocational support
  Equivocational support is demonstrated by language that works to both support and condemn actions. These expressions usually include the word "but" as the transitional

trigger to the condemnation. This hedging element is the subcategory significantly present in all "flame" messages.

- Insecure recommendations
  These recommendations are suggestions posed as optional considerations, often prefaced with the word "maybe."
- Insecure admissions
  Insecure admissions serve as a backdoor positioning device, indicating a "wishy-washy" or changeable attitude. They are illustrated by the use of adverbs such as "just," "simply," "only," and "merely" which remove an element of weight or significance from claim.
- Define the intangible
  This element has two faces, external and internal. The external form is demonstrated by ponderings that ask others to define the situation, or establish meaning, while the internal form is exhibited through the writer's own development of abstract descriptives that serve to define the situation, such as "kind of like" and "sort of like."

Declaratives:

Also significantly evident in the postings are messages that speak in absolute terms, defined herein as "Declaratives." These postings demonstrate the strongest forms of personal affiliation with stated position, often voicing unequivocal support, righteous indignation, or unflinching commentary. Missing in the declaratives are forms of hedging, and the build-up patterns of flaming. When these comments mean to cut, they cut directly, when they mean to support, they are equally direct and unwavering. They are written with a certain sense of authority and control, make bold statements, and use embedded questions rhetorically, rather than as elements to further the discussion.

Examples of Declaratives include:

> *I find it annoying that Mr. Smith interjects his comments during lecture. It is as if Jones was a student teacher and Smith feels the need to constantly check every single comment he makes. Additionally, I think the lectures go too slow. Why must we spend an entire day talking about input devices? Sure there are different types of "mice", everyone knows this stuff.*

I totally agree with what Kristy said!! There is nothing wrong with Mr. Smith adding to the class. He IS only trying to give us more information about the topics. I think it is find. I also think that it
helps to break up the class a bit.

Acknowledgement

Over the course of the discussion, nine messages dealt with agreement and five more dealt with emphatic agreement, often furthering the discussion by adding talk of additional concerns regarding the class while validating the author of the message being responded to. Ten messages contained new problems or expansion of other problems. In fourteen messages, the referential text was quoted at the bottom of the message, sometimes the message quoted contained other quoted messages often increasing the size of the message by many times the length the words written by the current author.

I agree that Mr. Smith chimes in the class lecture way too much. Maybe you should say something to him outside of class. I also feel that you, Jones, are being too lacidazical about the concerns of the students. I understand that it is hard to go at everyones pace. I do disagree with how you chose to tell the class. You made it seem that who ever wasn't keeping up with you was slow (mentally). I know from the individuals sitting around me that I am not the only one to feel this way.

Also, everyone in class knows they are in college, we pay for it in one way or the other. If your students have concerns about the mid-term and final I feel that you should listen just as much as condescemd. There is a lot of information in this class, between the videos, book and lecture you should really give us a list of information to focus on and then people wouldn't be so stressed. These are just suggestions. I love the class and everything that I am learning so please do not take things the wrong way. Thank you for your time.

Conclusion:

In the absence of mediation by the central characters being discussed, the discourse elements of declaration, hedging, and flaming, in the construction of this online conflict emerged as the primary engines that propelled the conflict forward, and finally to its resolution. The attributes of restatement, set-up, transition, and attack emerged as the salient features used by students as they constructed a conflict reality that was quite different in the virtual space of communication than it was in the physical classroom.

Hedges served as mutable positioning devices, seen in discourse that ranged from guilty admissions, and apologetic recommendations, to equivocal support, which both praised and condemned. Flaming created overt calls to action, and intensified the discussion while exposing the same pivotal discourse attribute of "equivocal support" nested in the "hedging" category. Left unmediated, and unchallenged by the instructors, a thirst for validation and endorsement came forward as student's sought a "reality check" which would verify their story. In the presence of a verification vacuum, flame messages served to extend the dialogue, resulting in subsequent postings that demonstrated clearer positioning, especially that of declarative support, by the students. It was noted that messages of support were overwhelmingly declarative in style exhibiting few, if any, elements of hedging.

Using electronic qualitative software, and graphic tables, provided us with ways to code, parse, sort, and view the data with tremendous fluidity and ease. After working with the initial index structure for a period of time, we recognized how elements that were previously considered discrete expressions, were actually attributes of grander themes, or in essence the

children of parent issues. This discovery allowed for a depth of consideration that added greater clarity to the analysis.

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forms of hedging:

equivocational support	he may have valid points
equivocational support	may have valid points
equivocational support	Mr. Smith has all good intentions but
equivocational support	I personally enjoy the lectures but
equivocational support	I know his knowledge is appreciated but
equivocational support	I don't mind Mr.Smith making some suggestions but
equivocational support	I know that he is well adversed in his subject but
insecure admissions	sometimes I think
insecure admissions	that's just my opinion
insecure admissions	Well that is just my thoughts
defining the intangible / ex	I was just wondering
defining the intangible / ex	I was just curious
defining the intangible / in	It's almost like
defining the intangible / in	Kind of like
insecure recommendations	maybe that will teach him
insecure recommendations	maybe you should say something
insecure recommendations	Maybe Jones should say something
insecure recommendations	Probably we should not discuss so much
insecure recommendations	Maybe he should sit in front
insecure recommendations	maybe they should co-teach
things we don't know	we do not know if he also interjects
things we don't know	Maybe they have a system
things we don't know	I don't think that he (Smith) realizes
things we don't know	I don't know how Mr. Jones feels about it but